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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the influence of a mandatory school-uniform dress code on academic achievement and discipline infractions. In addition, student gender and type of school district were compared to show the influence of this policy. Only schools that implemented a mandatory school-uniform policy in 1996 and had data for discipline infractions and academic achievement for the 1995-96 and 1996-97 school years were eligible for inclusion in the study. Subjects consisted of students in a southern Florida school district located in a predominately rural area. The final sample included 6 middle schools and 80 elementary schools from 2 school districts. Results show that elementary-school students in both rural and urban school districts demonstrated improvement in academic achievement for the first year following the implementation of the school-uniform policy. The discipline infractions of out-of-school suspensions and juvenile referrals had a statistically significant improvement. Middle-school students did not have a significant decrease for discipline infractions for the school year 1996-97. The numbers of students not promoted to the next grade showed a significant effect by district type but not by gender. Further research is needed on the importance of dress to influence educators as they help students achieve a healthier self-esteem. (Contains 15 references.) (RJM)

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The Influence of a Mandatory School Uniform Policy

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This study was designed to examine the influence of a mandatory school uniform dress code on academic achievement and discipline infractions. In addition, student gender and type of school district were compared to show the influence of this policy. Only schools with a mandatory school uniform policy implemented in 1996, and data for discipline infractions and academic achievement for the 1995-1996 and 1996-1997 school years were eligible for inclusion in the study. Subjects consisted of students in a South Florida school district located primarily in an urban area and a Central Florida school district located in a predominately rural area.

Delimitation factors caused the final sample to consist of six middle schools and 80 elementary schools from the two school districts. Analysis of data from these two Florida counties revealed that for the school year 1996-1997, scores on norm-referenced tests improved for reading and not for math. Within each school district there was academic improvement for some schools with the numbers of students not promoted to the next grade having a significant effect by district but not by gender. As educators work to improve the school academic environment, further research will be necessary to determine whether the mandatory school uniform policy will have a longitudinally positive or significant effect.

Introduction

One of the most easily observed messages is that provided by people through their clothing (Damhorst; Miller; & Michelman, *1999*; Soloman, 1986). Thus, clothing becomes an important source of information about the people we interact with each day. This can also be true in a school environment, where adults perceive and characterize the students based in part on their apparel (Levy & Dweck, 1999, Newman, 1980).

School children, in elementary and middle schools, have a need to belong and look like their peers; consequently, school hours become the time for group bonding and identity formation (Sweeney & Zionts, 1989). Teens may view garments as extensions of themselves and many of their clothing choices imitate favorite rock stars or professional athletes (Eicher, Baizerman & Michelman, 1991).

Schools, and the groups of students within them, have become reflections of their surrounding communities where violence dominates a community; students are no longer exempt from threats to their safety and security. There were 264,897 serious incidents related to school safety reported in Florida public schools for the 1995-96 school year (the first year of automated data collection and most recent information available), according to the Florida School Indicators Report (2000). They included 4,492 weapon possession incidents, eight percent of which involved firearms (Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, 2000).

Studies show that through making schools a safe and disciplined learning environment, students' academic achievement and discipline are enhanced (Kaplan, &

Maehr, 1999). A school uniform, in both public and private schools, is believed to symbolize to school officials, most parents and the community an environment where achievement, order and safety are priorities (Holloman, 1995). School administrators and parents who are supporting a school uniform policy believe that when uniforms are required, students lose their gang or high fashion identity markers and begin to base their identity on school performance (White, 2000; Dade, 1997).

School districts are trying to provide opportunities for all students to reach their full potential (Hamilton, 1999; Polk, 1997). Through the implementation of mandatory uniform policies, the importance of this study, based on social learning through symbolic interactions, will reveal implications for incorporating school uniforms into culturally diverse school districts throughout Florida, with results having nationwide implications.

The purposes of this study were to 1) examine the influence of a mandatory school uniform dress code policy on academic achievement and discipline infractions in Florida 2) to determine whether academic achievement and disciplinary infractions of elementary and middle school students varied by type of school district (rural versus urban) after the implementation of a mandatory uniform policy.

METHODOLOGY and PROCEDURE

Academic achievement

Standardized test scores of students in elementary and middle schools in two school districts were collected before and after the implementation of a mandatory, school uniform policy. Students' scores were collected on norm-referenced tests Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS - A), Form A, in Polk County. Dade County,

Florida scores were compiled from the Stanford Achievement Test, Eighth Edition (SAT-8) for reading and math skills. These scores were further compared for the school year 1998-1999 to examine if the mandatory school uniform policy made a longitudinal difference in the schools that were in the original sample.

Disciplinary infractions.

Data on disciplinary infractions including absenteeism, detentions, suspensions, expulsions and arrests were compiled from the schools in the study with data for discipline infractions. Only schools with a mandatory school uniform policy implemented in 1996 and with data for discipline infractions and academic achievement were used for inclusion in the study. Data were collected from all students in the elementary and the middle schools eligible to participate in the study. The schools for this study were not randomly selected because at the time of this study, only two school districts Dade and Polk County Florida, had established this policy.

The Polk County uniform policy is a district wide policy, while Dade County allowed each school to vote on the implementation of a mandatory school uniform. Only schools with a mandatory school uniform policy implemented in 1996 and with data for discipline infractions and academic achievement for the 1995-1996 and 1996-1997 school years were eligible for inclusion in the study. After eliminating schools that did not meet these criteria, the final sample of six middle schools and 80 elementary schools from the two school districts were used. The two school districts had 87,170 students that were studied.

Academic achievement information was collected from the Florida Department Of Education, for each school. Data were obtained for the 1995-1996 school year. The 1995-1996 school year data were for the last full school year prior to the implementation of the mandatory, school uniform policy. This same information was obtained for the 1996-1997 school year, the first year the mandatory school uniform policy was implemented at the schools and both sets of data were analyzed for the study.

Data Analysis. In order to determine the influence of a mandatory uniform policy on student achievement and behavior, this analysis was conducted by compiling the standardized test scores and total numbers of discipline infractions. Student achievement data of test scores and numbers of promotions were analyzed from only students having the mandatory policy. The research focused on two Florida County school districts with a mandatory uniform policy in effect for the 1996-1997 school year. Public domain information regarding academic achievement and disciplinary data was collected for the 1995-1996 school year, before a mandatory policy was in effect, and the 1996-1997 school year, the first year of the mandatory uniform policy and further analyzed for the 1998-1999 school years. The data consisted of scores on two norm-referenced standardized tests for elementary and middle schools in the school district. Polk County academic achievement was based on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS-A) for the 4th and 8th grades median percentile scores on their reading comprehension, mathematics computation and applications. Dade County used a comparable test instrument of Stanford Achievement Test, Eighth Edition.

In addition, nominal data were collected for the numbers of non-promotions, truancies, in-school suspensions, out-of school suspensions and referrals to juvenile authorities. For the purpose of this research analysis, students were grouped into the following categories: school district type (rural versus urban).

Variables. Discipline infractions and academic achievement were measured as the dependent variables. The independent variable was the type of school type and the dependent variables were the levels of academic achievement and numbers of disciplinary infractions for the rural and urban school districts.

School district type. The type of school district (rural vs. urban) was used as the first independent variable in examining academic achievement and discipline infractions before and after the mandatory school uniform was adopted.

Academic Achievement. Student achievement data were collected using the totals of students not promoted to the next grade level and the SAT - 8 scores for Dade County and the CTBS - A scores for Polk County. These data were chosen because they were the variables used by each Florida school district and the FSDOE to indicate academic improvement.

Discipline Infractions. Discipline infractions and academic achievement for elementary and middle school students in each school district were compared using data for the 1995-1996 school year and the 1996-1997 school year.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results indicated a significant improvement in elementary student achievement by district on the mean changes for male students' indicated improvements in reading scores. Promotions to the next grade level had the highest gains, for the Polk County (rural) School District.

Elementary school students in both rural and urban school districts showed improvement in academic achievement for the first year following the implementation of the school uniform policy. The academic achievement variables of reading and non-promotions had statistically significant improvements. The discipline infractions of out-of school suspensions and juvenile referrals had a statistically significant improvement at $p < .05$. The research objectives of disciplinary infractions for elementary school students in both rural and urban school districts did not indicate decreases for truancy or in-school suspensions. Middle school students did not have a significant decrease for discipline infractions for the school year 1996-1997.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of data from these two Florida counties revealed that, for the school year 1996-1997, within each school district there was academic improvement in some schools. The numbers of students not promoted to the next grade had a significant effect by district type but not by gender. However, as educators work to improve the schools learning environment, mandatory, school uniform policy will continue a

longitudinally positive or significant effect. Some schools in both districts had fewer discipline infractions, while others had more after the adoption of the mandatory uniform policy.

In summation, no single research study contains all the information needed to increase academic standards and decrease disciplinary problems. There are many variables in school improvement and this study has identified resources to assist school districts in the implementation of a policy based on research. The mandatory uniform policies currently being implemented by school districts in many areas may be perceived by the public as a educational strategy for improvement based on the structured environments seen in private schools. Data from this study indicates that elementary schools had some success in the rural district for the reading scores and for more students promoted to the next grade level. Discipline infractions decreased for truancies and out-of-school suspensions and referrals to juvenile authorities improved by district.

These changes show a need for further research on the importance of dress to influence educators as they assist students toward achieving a healthier self-esteem. A mandatory, school uniform policy can be a means of communicating this healthier self-esteem to others during the establishment of their sense of identity. The importance of clothing in students' social interactions once replaced with academic accomplishments may be a means of improving their self worth. There continues to be many variables that will allow for improved school environments that will enable students to prepare for greater academic challenges and healthier lifestyles.

Future Research and Recommendations

The findings of this study reinforce the need for more research to help understand the importance of a mandatory, school uniform policy and how it influences academic achievement as well as disciplinary infractions. Future research assessing the longitudinal effect of implementing a mandatory, school uniform policy will offer more detail about the variables studied. Replication studies for other states and school districts are suggested in order to determine whether all school districts will have similar positive results. Because no single factor determines student academic achievement or disciplinary infractions, other variables may be important for future study (e.g., psychological profiles of students, student mobility rates and teacher uniforms). Researchers could also consider the effect of uniform progression within a district (e.g., whether the positive aspects can be retained if uniforms are not continued at the high school level). This is a complex problem warranting further research.

This trend allows opportunities for families and school officials to become involved in assisting schools and students with the transition when no or limited dress code policies are changed to mandated uniform policies. Many schools in several states have initiated a mandatory uniform policy and a great deal remains to be learned about the influence of a mandatory school uniform policy on student academic achievement and discipline infractions.

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